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SUBJECT: LETTERS FROM HOA HAO DISSIDENT

REF: HCMC 0252

1. (SBU) Summary. Leading HCMC-based Hoa Hao "dissident" Tran Huu Duyen recently provided Post with two letters detailing his views on the status of religious freedom and the Hoa Hao. One letter was addressed to the Consulate General and one to Congress. While few of his points are new, they provide a reminder that there remains deep dissatisfaction in some Hoa Hao quarters with the current status quo. End Summary.

2. (SBU) In an English-language petition dated January 13, 2004, and given to Poloff in late February during preparations for a reporting trip to the Hoa Hao Holy Land in An Giang Province, Duyen detailed his version of Hoa Hao complaints from 1975 to present, including the treatment of Mr. Nguyen Van Lia (reftel). In the letter, he asks the USG to press the GVN in six specific areas. The complete text of the six points follows:

BEGIN TEXT

-- Allow Hoa Hao Buddhists to exercise their freedom of religion and participate in independent religious activities.

-- Allow Hoa Hao Buddhists to organize a General Election of the Central Council of Administrators and all other levels of the Hao Buddhist Church. The election of all administrative officials should be free and fair, with the participation of all Hoa Hao Buddhists, instead of the current system of appointment by the Communist government.

-- Allow the re-establishment of the Board of Directors of the Ancestral temple.

-- Allow the Hoa Hao Buddhist Church to reprint all publications and teachings in their original forms; allow the use and display of the Hoa Hao Buddhist flag at all religious functions and church properties.

-- Return all confiscated prosperities of the Hoa Hao Buddhist Church.

-- Release all Hoa Hao Buddhist prisoners who have been wrongfully convicted and/or imprisoned.

END TEXT

3. (SBU) In early March, Duyen forwarded to the ConGen by email a "Heart Letter from Mr. Tran Huu Duyen to U.S. Representatives and Senators sent via U.S. ConGen HCMC." The letter (in Vietnamese) thanks the USG and other foreign groups for pressuring the GVN on religious freedom issues, and describes his views on the current religious freedom and human rights situation in Vietnam. Included in the letter is a proposal for USG assistance to help revive a pre-1975 human rights organization of which he was a member. According to Duyen, the former Saigon government permitted the establishment of the Vietnam Human Rights and Civil Rights Protection Association in 1964. Several members were arrested after 1975. The letter goes on to say that Duyen would like the Consulate to forward this letter to the U.S. Congress so that the USG can create "favorable conditions" for this Association to operate again. Duyen further expressed hope that a resurrected Vietnam Human Rights and Civil Rights Protection Association could work with the current Government of Vietnam to find an "emergency escape route" toward "real democracy and fairness," so that a healthy Vietnam can be integrated into world economic, political and cultural life. According to his letter, this would be the start of a "national mediation and conciliation process."

4. (SBU) Due to their history of armed rebellion, the Hoa Hao have always been watched closely by whatever government happens to be in power. Duyen himself has spent nearly half of his 80-plus years in prison. He was arrested several times by the French before 1954, three times by the South Vietnamese, including for his alleged role in an attempted coup against President Ngo Dinh Diem in 1960, and another three times by the GVN. He was arrested most recently in 1991, and released in 1998 as part of a general amnesty. Duyen was a contemporary of Hoa Hao founder Huynh Phu So, and appears to command great respect and influence within the Hoa Hao community, both in Vietnam and overseas.

5. (SBU) The Hoa Hao have been greatly factionalized since the founder's death in 1947, and Duyen has always claimed to operate

as something of an honest broker between rival factions. (Post Note: Depending on the source estimates of the number of Hoa Hao followers ranges from 1.2 million to 3 million.) Duyen has also generally maintained that the privatistic nature of Hoa Hao worship really obviates the need for any sort of formal religious association. He is proud of his contacts with other political and religious activists, including outlawed Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam deputy Thich Quang Do (they were released from detention on the same day and transported in the same vehicle), Cao Dai priest Le Quang Tan, and democracy advocate Dr. Nguyen Dan Que. Duyen has recently moved to a small apartment on the outskirts of HCMC, which is an improvement over the run-down apartment he had occupied since the family home was confiscated by the GVN in 1975. His son, formerly a U.S.-trained officer in the South Vietnamese Navy, works as a cyclo driver.

16. (U) Post will forward an unofficial translation of the letter to the Desk via separate e-mail.  
YAMAUCHI